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EPA Testing Yards for Asbestos Near Former Spokane Factory

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Crews are testing residential yards near W.R. Grace & Co.'s former insulation factory in Spokane, Wa., for asbestos fibers that can cause cancer. The work was prompted by the recent declaration of Libby, Mont., as a public health emergency.

For 22 years, Vermiculite Northwest produced Zonolite, an asbestos-tainted attic insulation. Rail cars brought vermiculite ore from Libby to the plant, where furnaces heated the ore until it puffed up into lightweight insulation.

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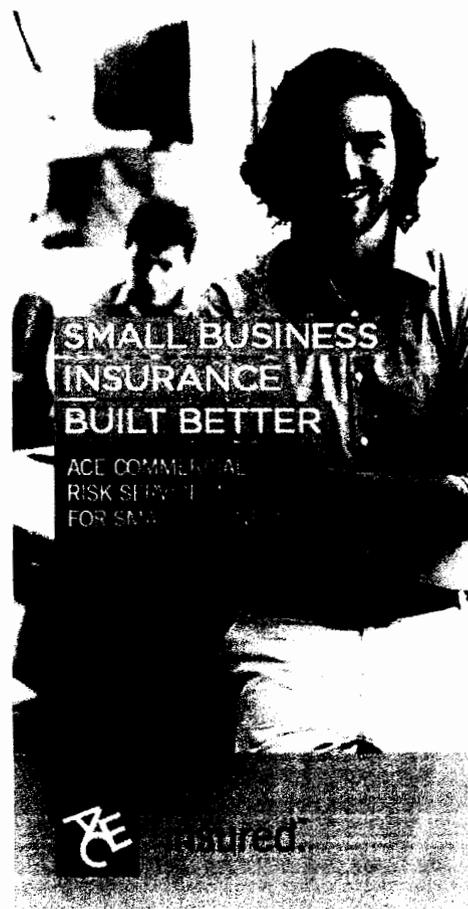


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Earlier this week, two men in white hazmat suits and respirators dug 30 soil samples from the lawn of Kandi Smith. Cars driving past her house slowed as drivers gawked at the scene.

"It was kind of embarrassing," said Smith, who wondered if strangers thought it was a meth lab cleanup.

Still, Smith welcomed the soil testing, which was conducted by the Environmental Protection Agency. When they bought their home three years ago, they didn't realize that an empty lot nearby was once the home of Vermiculite Northwest.



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"If there's asbestos, we'd rather know," Smith said.

Vermiculite contamination over seven decades has devastated the town of Libby, where it is blamed for more than 200 deaths and has left thousands of people suffering from asbestos-related illnesses, including asbestosis and mesothelioma, a cancer of the lung lining. The EPA earlier this month took the unprecedented step of declaring Libby a federal public health emergency, vowing to finally finish a cleanup that has languished for nearly a decade.

In Spokane, the EPA in 2000 and 2001 sampled soils from yards near the Grace plant and found only trace amounts of asbestos. That prompted the agency to give the area a clean bill of health.

But asbestos testing has improved.

"Asbestos is a threat when it becomes airborne and can be inhaled. Asbestos in the soil can become airborne even at very low levels," said Greg Weigel, the agency's on-scene coordinator.

"A lot of the data has been coming out of the work in Libby," said Jed Januch, a senior EPA investigator.

For years, yards were considered safe if soil samples contained less than 1 percent asbestos. But "that was not a health-based standard," Januch said.

Old methods could detect asbestos at rates of 1 percent in soil samples. New testing can detect asbestos at rates of 0.25 percent in soil samples, and emerging methods show promise for detecting even smaller ratios.

The EPA is testing soils at nine homes near the Vermiculite Northwest site, which W.R. Grace closed in 1973 after a whistleblower tipped state inspectors to high asbestos levels inside. Spokane County's road department bought the property, which was capped with asphalt as part of the cleanup.

EPA will spend between \$900 and \$1,400 on soil analyses for each yard. The agency also is sampling soils on county-owned property. Results could be ready by late August.

Depending on the results, the initial sampling could trigger additional yard testing. The next step would involve taking air samples during common soil-disturbing activities, such as raking, moving the lawn or shoveling dirt.

Information from: *The Spokesman-Review*, www.spokesman.com

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